Good leaders copy, Great leaders steal

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Introduction

"It comes down to trying to expose yourself to the best things that humans have done – and then try to bring those things in to what you're doing. Picasso had a saying: Good artists copy, Great artists steal – and we have always been shameless about stealing great ideas." – Steve Jobs.

Steve Jobs quoted Picasso, but even Picasso's quote was not an original. It was borrowed from the poet T.S. Eliot who said "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different." And this is exactly that what it is all about. When we are talking about copying versus stealing, we mean that it is not just copying something from someone else, but it is about making it something of yourself and while doing so moving away from and even improving the original.

Translatio, Imitatio and Aemulatio

The concept of copying and improving on the original is not new either. As early as the Roman era, it was customary for authors to build upon the example of their literary forebears. The tradition continued to flourish in the Renaissance, the period which above all others sought to renew, through reviving, the literary, philosophical, linguistic, architectural and pictorial examples from Classic Antiquity. To this day some poets and novelists, and even moviemakers or PC and games developers continue to draw the line from Antiquity to the present-day. In the attempts to look for 'new forms for old ceremonies', a subdivision into three (graded) steps of phases is usually used: Translatio (translation), Imitatio (imitation) and Aemulatio (emulation).

Translation. The meaning hardly needs clarifying: the Roman writer who translated his Greek example merely transferred the text which he had at hand into his own language. If he remained true to himself and consistent with his method, if possible he neither added a word to nor dropped one of what he found in the original.

Imitation. Imitation then took this process just one step further. In the Emperor Augustus's time, Greek literature served as a welcome example for its Latin successor: even as early as the age of Hellenism this more creative imitation of literary examples laid the basis of many Latin masterpieces.

Emulation. Within imitation, the concept of emulation, gradually came to the fore. The intention was to attempt, and if at all possible, not merely to equal but surpass the literary model (e.g. Virgil as compared with Homer)

Shu-Ha-Ri

The concept of borrowing, stealing, collecting or whatever name you want to give it, is not only restricted to the Western world but also has its roots in Eastern society in the traditional Japanese method of knowledge transmission called Shu-Ha-Ri.

"Shu-Ha-Ri" literally means embracing the kata, diverging from the kata and discarding the kata. The pursuit of training in a classical Japanese endeavor almost always follows this educational process. This unique approach to learning has existed for centuries in Japan and has been instrumental in the survival of many older Japanese knowledge traditions. These include such diverse pursuits as martial arts, flower arranging, puppetry, theater, poetry, painting, sculpture and weaving. People who are learning and mastering new skills pass through three quite different stages of behavior: following, detaching, and fluent.

People in the following stage look for one procedure that works. Even if ten procedures could work, they can't learn ten at once. They need one to learn first, one that works. They copy it; they learn it. In this stage, practitioners measure success by (a) whether the procedure works and (b) how well they can carry out the procedure.

In the detaching, or Level 2, stage, people locate the limitations of the single procedure and look for rules about when the procedure breaks down. They are actually in the first stage of a new learning; namely, learning the limits of the procedure. The person in the detaching stage learns to adapt the procedure to varying circumstances. He is now more interested in learning the ten alternative procedures, in learning when each is most applicable and when each breaks down.

In the third, fluent stage, it becomes irrelevant to the practitioner whether he is following any particular technique or not. His knowledge has become integrated throughout a thousand thoughts and actions. Ask him if he is following a particular procedure, and he is likely to shrug his shoulders: It doesn't matter to him whether he is following a procedure, improvising around one, or making up a new one. He understands the desired end effect and simply makes his way to that end.

In other words a Shu person knows exactly one technique and will stick to it whether it is appropriate to solve the particular problem or not. Only a few persons will break away and learn other techniques and eventually become Ri persons. A Ri person has developed a large repertoire of techniques and applies the best possible techniques to solve the problem at hand.

Originality and Creativity

In today's age, creativity and innovation are crucial. Moreover, innovation can no longer be outsourced, but has to become part of the DNA of every organization. Darwin already said that "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." This is even more true than it ever was.

We are also taught to value creativity and to disdain copying or plagiarism. But then the question pops up what we mean by creativity. In Shakespeare's time, unlike ours, creativity was understood to be improvement rather than originality – in other words creative imitation.

By the end of the Renaissance, there was great value placed on an original, and an artist's signature became extremely important. Copying and plagiarism were now condemned, laying an initial fog of misunderstanding over the creative process. The more valuable the concept of originality became, the thicker the fog became.

Today the cult, the illusion, of originality still creates a fog of misunderstanding that smothers creativity. We are taught to value creativity and to disdain copying or plagiarism. But there's a fine line between plagiarism and creativity, a line defined by the source of the theft. In this context copying is the source of creativity and stealing is an intellectual activity to move away from it. You must be able to understand the principles why something works and then be able to apply this knowledge in new original ways.

The Six Steps to Business Innovation by Building on the Ideas of Others

In his book Borrowing Brilliance, Murray (2010) presents a six-step model to go from translation to emulation. Below you will find a slightly adapted version of this model.

Step One: Defining: Define the problem you are trying to solve

A creative idea is the solution to a problem. Author Norman Vincent Peale already said that "Every problem has in it the seeds to its own solution." How you define it will determine how you solve it. Mistakes result from solving too narrow or too broad a problem. So, identify as many problems as possible using tools like observation and then sort from high-level to low-level problems.

Step Two: Collecting: Collect ideas from places with a similar problem. These are the construction materials for your solution. Using problem definition, borrow from places with a similar one, so start with your competitors, then look to another industry, and finally look outside business and to the sciences, arts, or entertainment to see how they solve that problem.

Step Three: Combining: Connect and combine these collected ideas. Aristotle already said "It is from the metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh." Making combinations is the essence of creativity. So use the borrowed materials from the last step and find an appropriate metaphor to structure your new idea. The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. In other words, use an existing idea to form the framework for a new idea by establishing a metaphor, extending it, and then discarding it when it no longer works. Remember that the metaphor only gives you a framework or structure but not yet a complete solution.

Step Four: Incubating: Allow combinations to incubate into a solution. Effective creative thinking is sometimes not thinking at all. The subconscious mind is better at making combinations. The creative pause is an attempt to block your intellectual stream of thought and let your ideas flow in a different direction. To do this, give the subconscious time to work and quiet conscious thought so you can listen to the subconscious speak. Use tools like: sleeping on it, pausing, putting it away, and listening for misunderstandings. In other words, often the most effective thinking is not thinking at all.

Step Five: Assessing: Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the solution. Assessment is the result of viewpoint. Intuition is the result of assessment. Use positive and negative assessment (Yellow Hat and Black Hat) to analyze your solution and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the idea. This leads to creative intuition (Red Hat): an idea that has these things (positives) but not those things (negatives).

Step Six: Enhancing: Eliminate the weak points while enhancing the stronger ones. Ideas evolve through trial-and-error adjustments. They self-organize. Return to the first five steps to make your adjustments of the idea: redefine; recollect, recombine, reincubate; and reassess it all. The order in which you do these things will be different with every idea, for the creative process will create itself.

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Additional useful information

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Brief Bio Presenter

Harry van der Schans, de Bono Master Trainer and director of the De Bono Center of Expertise at Koning Willem I College / School for the Future. Harry works at Koning Willem I College, a Dutch Community College which has set out to incorporate the teaching and learning of creative thinking skills and competencies in the curriculum. For this the College makes use of the thinking techniques developed by dr. Edward de Bono. Harry van der Schans is a certified De Bono trainer in Six Hats (Dublin, 2004) and Lateral Thinking (Dublin, 2005) and in 2012 he was appointed de Bono Master Trainer in Six Hats. As head of the De Bono Center of Expertise he is responsible for the implementation process at Koning Willem I College / School for the Future. Next to that he has also been trained in various other (creative) thinking techniques (Mindmapping, Memory training, Creative Problem Solving, Time Management, Scenario Thinking etc.) which he incorporates when facilitating groups. He graduated from Radboud University in Linguistics and since 2004 he has trained and facilitated thousands of people in the field of creative and critical thinking both in the Netherlands and abroad.